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TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Literature reveals that “teacher empowerment” (to become an active decision-maker) is considered a key element in successful school reforms. Despite the many educational reforms that have been executed in Pakistan, limited work has been done for teacher empowerment; as a result, the expected outcomes were not achieved. To facilitate the teacher empowerment process, the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) under USAID Project-III, planned and implemented a series of professional development programmes for rural and suburban teachers from Non-Governmental Organizations and Community-Based Organizations (NGOs and CBOs) working in the education sector of Sindh.

The focus of these programmes was on teacher empowerment strategies, which have been addressed in the areas of curricular content, teaching methods, teacher education, inter and intra personal skills, and having a say in the setting of school policy. These professional programmes helped teachers to develop themselves as decision makers in curriculum setting, work with colleagues, involve parents in school activities, bring into practice newly acquired applicable knowledge and skill in their classes in order to trigger a positive change in the teaching and learning process, taking into account their contextual realities.

During follow-up visits and workshops, the team found that a majority of NGOs has assigned significant roles to graduates from AKU-IED as they proved to be successful teachers with notable decision-making capabilities.

This presentation discusses the initial achievements of strategies included in the offered programmes alongside paying specific attention to the progress made by the participants and its implications in the areas mentioned earlier on.

Introduction

The term “empowerment” originated in written form in the year 1645 and it means to authorize or to license (Grimmet, 1994). It means that somebody empowers someone else by imparting specific knowledge and skills that allow that person to work within the existing system. In recent years, progressive educators have been promoting the “empowerment” approach to education so that teachers may benefit from it. The term empowerment however has been a non-starter in Pakistan. Since the term ‘empowerment’ is normally misinterpreted as ‘might’ or ‘strength’, it entails an element of opposition from the non-teaching sector. Due to this, many traditional societies in Pakistan have responded negatively towards any programme or project that is based itself on the empowerment approach. Therefore people need to understand the actual semantics underlying this term.

The feeling of inner strength can be described perfectly by using the term “empowerment”, which can be derived from the verbs to enable, to allow or to permit. Extending this concept further by empirically grounding it within education, Short and Rinehart (1992) constructed six dimensions in this concept: (a) decision making (b) professional growth (c) status (d) self efficacy (e) autonomy and (f) impact. Accordingly teachers must not only have the means to make change, but believe that their efforts can make a difference (Short & Greer, 1993).

By keeping in mind this situation, there arises a need to develop a variety of appropriate programmes, which will serve to empower teachers, especially those that function in primary education sector. So the Aga Khan Foundation, Pakistan (AKF,P) launched a project titled ‘Pakistan Non-Government Initiatives’ (PNI) with an aim to enhance the capacity of NGOs/CBOs to promote pre-primary and primary education in general and girls education in particular, in rural and semi-urban areas. Realizing the need for strengthening NGOs/CBOs’ capacity building in the area of primary education, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided some financial assistance to AKF, P for the PNI Phase - II initiatives in 1999. These initiatives comprised four projects:

- 1) Improvement of pre-primary and primary education in rural Sindh
- 2) Development of NGO/CBO partnership and outreach
- 3) Strengthening NGOs/CBOs’ capacity in education
- 4) Documentation of more popular practices and lessons learned in the areas of community management, financing of education, and policy advocacy. The Aga Khan Education

Services, Pakistan (AKES, P) managed the first two projects, whereas the Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) dealt with projects iii and iv.

The Project - III had on its agenda four main objectives:

- To build upon the successful works of NGO's/CBOs' in rural Sindh;
- To provide management training to head teachers, community management personnel, and NGO/CBO staff;
- To provide follow-up support to teachers and others;
- To develop the capacity among NGO/CBO members to monitor and document the progress of NGO/CBO educational initiatives in a better fashion.

Strategies applied

Following are the strategies applied by USAID Project - III in order to empower teachers:

Certificates in Education; Primary Education Programme

The overall aim of the Certificate in Education; Primary Education Programme was to develop participants as effective and reflective teachers enabling them to improve the quality of education in their context. The aim was to better the teachers' content knowledge, enhance pedagogical skills, classroom management and students' assessment strategies within the framework of rural education, and eventually strengthen the capacity of NGOs/CBOs. The course content was based upon a 'thematic and integrated' approach with innovative instructional strategies. In addition to this, the participants were expected to enhance their knowledge and skills of building a sound relationship between school and community for promotion of education,

Advanced Diploma in Education; Primary Education Programme

This programme was designed as a one-year field-based programme for NGOs/CBOs primary schoolteachers who completed successfully the AKU-IED Certificate in Education: Primary Education. The programme was modular-based containing 400 contact hours (210 contact hours for classroom and 190 contact hours for practicum). The overall aim of the programme was to develop the participants' pedagogical content knowledge enabling them to teach more effectively in their classrooms and further provide professional support to colleagues in their respective schools. The programme also developed the participants as 'academic leaders' for taking on leadership roles in organizing and

conducting professional development activities for teachers and others at Learning Resource Centres (LRCs). This programme contributed towards enhancing institutional capacity of their respective NGOs and CBOs.

Follow-up visits

The programmes have been designed as such to make them context-driven coupled with an action research approach in which the participants are required to work in their context to practice and reflect upon newly acquired knowledge and skills. During follow up visits, the AKU-IED professional development team visited each participant individually while they were working in their classroom and collectively at their Learning Resource Center (LRC). The AKU-IED graduates were expected to place a foundation stone for establishing an LRC for NGO and CBO cluster schools working collectively as a team. For such visits the professional development team had to document their experiences and opinions. The AKU-IED team supports the graduates thus:

- to encourage the course participants to implement and reflect on new knowledge and skills in their context;
- to develop course participants confidence by applying new skills and competence of conducting programmes and applying them in their own context;
- to facilitate the course participants in minimizing the challenges faced by them and to develop alternative mechanisms for the effective implementation of new ideas;
- to initiate in their new role as a resource person for their and cluster schools;
- to develop understanding of their new role of academic leadership; and
- to document field experiences and share their experiences with other colleagues.

Initial achievements

In order to enhance the NGOs and CBOs' capacity, the professional development of seventy-five teachers was envisaged in the project as a target, but considering the requirement of NGOs/CBOs, 210 (54 Males and 156 Females) primary schoolteachers from the seven Certificates in Education: Primary Education Programmes and 32 (11 Males and 21 Females) from two Advanced Diploma in Education: Primary Education Programme were professionally developed. At present all these graduates are empowered in their roles and working successfully in their respective schools.

The programmes offered by AKU-IED assists their participants in mentally preparing themselves to think about the problems, so that they may arrive at a suitable decision.

It was kept into consideration that the empowerment as authorize or to license is a life-long process, which requires ability of decision-making. In this process as substantiated in Bacchus (1996) and Nias (1989), the teachers/professionals have to think critically, argue, compare, contrast and eventually come to a consensus.

In order to empower teachers, the programme gave more emphases on the following roles:

Empowerment in pedagogical content knowledge

One of the main objectives of the programme was to emphasize on the enhancement of pedagogical content knowledge of the participants. Since the intention was focused on developing participants as effective teachers, the activities were planned to enhance their pedagogical content knowledge in all subject areas such as Language, Social Studies, Mathematics and Science. The course participants justified their thinking, and at the end they developed a deeper understanding of the subjects. Their lesson plans and observation checklists of teaching practices provide substantial evidence in this regard. The activities that they developed during the programme affirmed their conceptual development. The innovative instructional strategies that they were exposed to had a consequential impact on their teaching. One of the participants advocated the same viewpoint, “The hands-on, minds-on activities provide the students with opportunities of getting involved into the process through which they can develop their understanding not by rote learning but by doing”. Therefore several methods and strategies for imparting knowledge in the above-mentioned subjects were introduced to the class as, reported in Gudmondsdottir (1990), “The ‘special amalgam’ of pedagogy and content made them realize the importance of different aspects of the interactive teaching process.”

Empowerment in working with colleagues

Facts reveal that normally teachers do not allow colleagues into their classrooms during the course of teaching session and prefer to remain isolated without sharing and providing professional support to one and other due to many reasons that need to be explored. Research literature on school culture and staff development i.e. Hargreaves & Dawes (1990), have highlighted the importance of releasing teachers from their isolation by “cracking the walls of privatism” and emphasized collaboration among the teachers for their professional development. Therefore, it was emphasized during the programmes that the participants should go through a process by which they could practice what they have acquired in a congenial environment. The intent was to make them realize that

collaboration is a fundamental aspect of developing a professional culture in schools. While implementing guided tasks, the course participants were observed to be supporting each other and offering suggestions, imparting and receiving constructive qualitative feedback and sharing concerns with each other. The experience of working in such an environment has helped them in working with their colleagues in their schools, as one of the graduates reflects:

After the programme, for the first time in my life I was learning about teaching in different ways, I learned how to take observations and provide feedback to and facilitate our colleagues; at that time there was a feeling of authority. Authority in the sense that we now knew more than our colleagues did about pedagogy because we were provided with the opportunity to explore new dimensions to teaching by way of debate now I can share with them my experiences and what I have learnt.

To hear a teacher speak with such enthusiasm about the feelings of empowerment and authority she had over other teachers was quite significant in indicating how the programme effectively changed her self-image as an educator.

Empowering teachers to deal with parents

These programmes assisted teachers in authorizing the involvement of parents in the school; this practice accelerated a positive change in the progress of a child as one of the graduates reflected:

When the charge was initially in the hands of the management, I requested them to call parent-teacher meetings in the school but nobody listened to me. However after attending the programme, when management gave me the authority, I allowed parents to discuss everything regarding their child. When I started involving parents in school activities and shared the success and challenges of their children, I noted the obvious change in the progress of students.

Literature on this subject reveals that children's achievement /education in primary school is enhanced if parents meet with the expectations that they are faced with and have a positive attitude towards education and if they encourage and support their children (Ceroni, 1994).

Empowerment as in having a say in setting school policies

The programme helped the participants in presenting their views confidently in front of those that helped them, how to value others' ideas and suggest their own views in an amiable manner such that the management or others may agree with them, as specifically highlighted in Harris, J. M. (1995) that, "Good preparation is the secret of a successful presentation". (p.84) The participants applied their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills while working on different tasks. They also helped each other in enquiring and responding to critical questions. These activities developed their communication skills and built their confidence in handling the responses and having a say in setting school policies. One of the graduates had the subsequent reflection; he shared the reflection during the follow-up visit as below:

Initially when I was in school before the programme, I had many ideas but did not have the skill to convey my message and I could not even speak with or respond to anyone in the staff room, as a result of which I was terrified and depressed. But now I can safely say that my confidence levels have increased, and even if not very fluently, I can convey my message more effectively without getting terrified or feeling shy, that is I feel more certain in my views after having completed this programme. It has developed my communication skills immensely as well as enhanced my self-confidence. In addition, due to possessing an effective background knowledge of school management and policies, the school's administrative body was more receptive to the ideas I had to offer.

The Story of an Initial Impact of Teacher Empowerment: Ms. NS (NGO - Naz Old Boys Welfare Association)

Ms. NS, an educational promoter is 27 years old working at Naz Old Welfare Association, Khairpur. She is a post-graduate with a 5-year experience in primary education. She successfully completed her Certificate in Education: Primary Education Programme in 2001 and Advanced Diploma in Primary Education Programme in 2002. She has grown as an academic leader at her NGO. About her learning she said:

...before coming to AKU-IED, I had sufficient content knowledge and an understanding about the concepts of teaching and learning but I was somehow unclear about my roles and responsibilities as a teacher and was unfamiliar with the issues related to community education, quality

education. I used to converse rudely and did not listen to other fellow teachers' ideas and opinions. After attending the programmes, I felt a tremendous improvement in my teaching style. I acquired a wider range and depth of the relevant content and different concepts and came up with important links between those concepts, activities and strategies. Because of my command over the content aspect, my pedagogical skills also improved. I can now tackle students' questions more confidently and employ creativity in the classroom and during the NGO Access Programme and workshops. It greatly pleases me to know [that] my attitude has totally changed. I have started treating teachers more politely and impart rightly deserved respect to colleagues' ideas and solving their problems collaboratively. I am an educational promoter; I have changed my perception of quality education. I think more about the students' learning rather than keep a record of their attendance and mark their daily diaries. I make better presentations in the Parents Education Committee (PEC) because I am more confident and I have developed the habit of prioritizing my focus areas and using the problem solving process, which I learnt at AKU-IED.

Challenges

- Some of the participants had lacked enough content knowledge and had many misconceptions. Therefore most of the time was spent elucidating concepts at the very basic level.
- Some of the participants of rural Sindh felt a little uneasy conveying their ideas and thoughts in Urdu. Sometimes, we had to slow down our pace due to the language constraints. Perhaps they needed time to understand the written material and to internalize the teaching-learning concepts.
- Some of the stakeholders of NGOs did not welcome any interventions in their policies and felt they would be deprived of their right to make decisions in case of alien involvement.

Lessons learnt

- Mutual trust and respect between NGOs/CBOs and AKU-IED helped both ends to understand each other's perspectives, thus developing a favorable rapport.

- Field visits helped develop increased positive interaction between AKU-IED, NGO/CBOs and their schools. This also helped the participants to keep their morale high while implementing new ideas.
- Positive collaboration among the NGOs/CBOs as well as participants provided all CPs with the opportunity to share expertise and resources in order to accomplish common goals. This allowed CPs to visit each other's schools and start providing support in conducting professional developmental activities.
- Concerted efforts made by NGOs/CBOs and AKU-IED to create an environment for sharing resources and ideas may lead towards NGO networking.

Conclusion

The USAID Project -III aimed to develop an environment in which teachers are urged to act as professionals and are treated as professionals who have the freedom to make decisions. AKU-IED emphasizes collaboration and a feeling of togetherness thereby complementing all IED graduates to work towards local empowerment, sustainability and an intricate network within the NGO/CBO sphere.

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